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FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
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INFO ISLAMIC CONFERENCE COLLECTIVE
AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE
HQ COALITION PROV AUTH BAGHDAD

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 000408

PARIS FOR ZEYA
PORT AU PRINCE FOR SCHMONSEES

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: BERRI EMPHASIZES AL-SISTANI'S IMPORTANCE
FOR AMAL MOVEMENT, AND FOR SHI'AS IN GENERAL

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR VINCENT M. BATTLE; REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D).

1. (C) IN A JANUARY 15 CONVERSATION WITH AMBASSADOR, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY SPEAKER NABIH BERRI SAID HE AND HIS AMAL MOVEMENT FOLLOWERS LOOKED TO IRAQ'S GRAND AYATOLLAH ALI AL-SISTANI AS THEIR PRIMARY SOURCE OF RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY. ACCORDING TO BERRI, AMAL HAD PREVIOUSLY LOOKED TO ITS FOUNDER, IMAM MOUSA AL-SADR, THEN, FOLLOWING AL-SADR'S DISAPPEARANCE IN LIBYA IN 1978, TO LEBANESE HIGHER SHI'A COUNCIL HEAD MOHAMMAD MEHDI SHAMSEDDIN, WHO DIED THREE YEARS AGO.

2. (C) AL-SISTANI'S FOLLOWING IN LEBANON WAS NOT LIMITED TO AMAL MEMBERS, ACCORDING TO BERRI. IN FACT, THE MAJORITY OF LEBANON'S SHI'AS, INCLUDING SOME MEMBERS OF HIZBALLAH, LOOKED TO AL-SISTANI FOR GUIDANCE. AL-SISTANI'S INFLUENCE WAS ALSO STRONG IN IRAN. COMPARING AL-SISTANI WITH THE LEBANESE SHI'A LEADER MOHAMMAD HUSSEIN FADLALLAH, BERRI USED THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AS AN ANALOGY: AL-SISTANI IS "LIKE THE POPE" FOR THE WORLD'S SHI'AS, WHILE FADLALLAH'S STANDING IS ANALOGOUS TO THAT OF LEBANON'S MARONITE PATRIARCH. "NOT EVERY MARJ'A (SHI'A RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY) IS SMART," BERRI SAID. AL-SISTANI, HOWEVER, IS NOT ONLY WIDELY RESPECTED BUT ALSO HIGHLY INTELLIGENT.

3. (C) BERRI AT FIRST CLAIMED THE AMAL MOVEMENT WAS "VERY ACTIVE" IN IRAQ, ALTHOUGH HE LATER BACKPEDALED, SAYING HE MEANT AMAL WAS SIMPLY "RESPECTED" AMONG IRAQIS. AS PROOF OF THIS, BERRI HAS RECEIVED A NUMBER OF HIGH-RANKING IRAQI OFFICIALS IN BEIRUT. FOR EXAMPLE, HE HAS RECEIVED AN IRAQI OFFICIAL NAMED AL-ALLAWI (IGC MEMBER WITH LEBANON CONNECTIONS) THREE TIMES SO FAR, HE SAID. REGARDING PLANS FOR A TRANSITION TO IRAQI SOVEREIGNTY, BERRI ADVISED THE USG TO "PAY ATTENTION" TO AL-SISTANI'S DEMANDS FOR DIRECT ELECTIONS. "DON'T MAKE A MISTAKE" IN DEALING WITH IRAQ'S SHI'AS, HE SAID. IT WAS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT THAT THERE BE NO DIVISION OF IRAQ -- "WE DON'T WANT WHAT HAPPENED IN LEBANON."

BATTLE